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ABSTRACT

The power of the symbol "Sephardic" to foster community association is extremely problematical in the Washington, D.C., context. Washington's Sephardic population is heterogeneous with respect to generation, self-deinition, and culture. Complicating the situation is the nature of Washington itself, which in turn is inextricably linked to the selected Sephardic population that is drawn to the region. Washington attracts people who are willing to uproot themselves from established communities to pursue economic gain, and whose primary loyalty, therefore, is to the institution and to professional networks, not to the locale. Washington is a city of transients, is highly cosmopolitan, and has residence patterns based on class rather than ethnicity. Thus, ethnic identity is elective rather than necessary. Furthermore, cosmopolitan Sephardim can easily find compatible associates through the city's numerous cultural, social, and occupational societies. If one is willing to accept community as an abstract concept indicating a pride in a glorious, mostly unknown history and culture, and a tradition of warmth and hospitality, then there is a Sephardic community in Washington. Going beyong this, however, in a city like Washington, where each step to create community is a rational purposeful act, antithetical to the end that is desired, most Sephardim abandon the effort. For them, Sephardic warmth must rest in their cherished and idealized past and they must continue their accommodation to American life on the intimate as well as the public level. (CMG)

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Ruth Gruber Fredman

A paper presented for the panel on Jews in Cities, American Anthropological Association meeting in Washington, D.C., December 6, 1982.

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TOO-COMFORTABLE STRANGERS: CULTURAL ASSOCIATION AMONG THE SEPHARDIM OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ruth Gruber Fredman

The Sephardic Jews of the Washington metropolitan area are an internationally sophisticated, heterogeneous and economically aggressive middle-class population. As such, they may be seen as a microcosm of a large sector of the area's population. This very compatibility, which makes the Sephardim comfortable in the city, makes it difficult to organize this collection of individuals into a more coherent community. Paradoxically, the cosmopolitan nature and social and economic flexibility that prompt the Sephardim to live in Washington leave many with an uneasy feeling of having found a home that is not quite a home.

The Washington Sephardim

Sephardic Jews have been in the District of Columbia since 1914, when the first settlers arrived from Greece and Turkey.[1] These few pioneers soon organized a burial society, the Yom Tov Society, which continues to this day. The Yom Tov Society also met for religious services in Ladino under the leadership of Rabbi Solomon Ereza, from Turkey, who provided the spiritual center for the community from the Balkans until his death in 1977.

Through the years this nucleus expanded as it was enriched by Syrian Jews from New York City and by others from Morocco. In the years since the Second World War, there has been a steady immigration of Sephardim from the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa. In 1972, the Yom Tov Society was absorbed by the newly constituted Magen David Sephardi Congregation, which is composed primarily of the Moroccan-born.

To this day, the Sephardim do not have their own building. They meet instead in a synagogue in Chevy Chase, Maryland during the year and in another

synagogue for High Holidays. The core group, the Congregation, lists about 600 members. About 35 persons attend the Sabbath minyan and three to four hundred are present for High Holidays. However, for reasons to be discussed in this paper, a more reasonable estimate of the population may be that a few thousand persons who call themselves "Sephardi" are among the approximately 160,000 Jews thought to be in the Washington area.[2]

This brief history suggests several facts about the Washington Sephardim. There is the primary problem of a self-definition that divides just as it unifies, a definition that is debated as history, culture, ritual form or blood line. In its simplest form, "Sepharad" means "Spain." To those of Balkan descent and from some communities of the northern Maghreb, a Sephardi is simply one who can trace his ancestry to the Iberian peninsula. For these Sephardim, a history of Judeo-Spanish in the family is a verification of such ancestry, even if they themselves do not speak it. Those from other parts of the Mediterranean and Middle East prefer a broader definition. In their interpretation of history, the period of Spain is seen as just one part of the continual migrations of Jews throughout the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great, if not before. So broadened, the Sephardi definition encompasses many historically diverse populations and bypasses questions of ancestral ties and linguistic heritage. It also allows a great diversity of local cultures to be included in the supposedly defining identity; it allows the Iranian Jews who have recently arrived in Washington to be counted as Sephardim (Some emigrees from Spain did travel to Iran, but it is extremely doubtful that Washington's Iranian population is descended from this group alone and is not, as is usually the case elsewhere, the result of the blending of emigree and host Jewish populations.)

To the Balkan Jews, those from Morocco are "Arabs," because of their preferred music, festival dress or special customs. This is so despite the fact that the Moroccan Jewish population in Washington is primarily an elite, French-speaking and "Europeanized" group.

Unlike the experience in Atlanta, Seattle, New York or Montreal, Washington has never been the destination of a concentrated migration of Sephardim from one region, such as Rhodes, Aleppo or Istanbul. Such a concentration allows for the immediate establishment of institutions with a dominant religious and social format, one which can absorb new members and new influences gradually. The Sephardim in the Washington area have always been forced to use the most encompassing definition of "Sephardi" in order to welcome potential members and so maintain their congregation. But new arrivals bring with them their own traditions and expectations of liturgical sound and custom. Those who relaxed in the sounds of the eastern Mediterranean sung by Rabbi Ereza felt they lost a home as the prayer community became increasingly Moroccan-born. By the second generation, the American-born Sephardim find the Orthodox North African custom totally alien, and prefer the more decorous, and English, Ashkenazic ritual.

As just indicated, the heterogeneity of the population is generational as well as definitional and cultural. Those who strongly defend their Sephardi identity include first, second and third-generation Americans, those born in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran and England. Some have a great knowledge of history, culture and ritual, but many more do not. Yet all these individuals lay claim to the same word.

The power of the multivocal symbol "Sephardic" to foster community association is extremely problematical in the Washington context. In addition to the

difficulties caused by the indefinite definition, there are the obstacles encountered by the Washington area itself. And these social, economic and demographic obstacles are in turn inextricably linked to the select Sephardic population that is drawn to the region.

Washington: a select city, a select population

It has been suggested that Washington is indicative of the direction of much of American society because of its extreme concentration of managerial, technological and service-oriented employment.[3] Washington may therefore be seen as an appropriate laboratory for modern social science research.

The region offers a minimum of"blue collar" employment, whether in manufacturing or similar entry-level work, to attract or retain individuals who are not well educated. Even the so-called "blue-collar" jobs in the area often necessitate technical training. Washington draws people from all over the nation and the world who are willing to uproot themselves from established communities in pursuit of economic gain, and whose primary loyalty therefore is to the institution and to professional networks, and not to the locale. This contingent relation to locale is also part of the experience of the uprooted individual who comes to the city via the alternate, traditional route of personal networks that offer a job, a place to stay, or help in establishing a small business.

The first Sephardim to come to Washington were small businessmen and artisans. Their children and grandchildren are likely to be professionals, either self-employed or with the government. Washington's Sephardic Jews include lawyers, judges, professors, engineers, embassy and State Department personnel, and economists with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Others are small businessmen. Many young men from Morocco were aided in getting an economic foothold in America by a prominent man from Fez, who trained them in his beauty culture school. Consequently, beauty salons in

prestigeous neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan area are owned by Jews from Morocco with French, and so "elite," names.

None of the professional Sephardim interviewed said he or she knew of other Sephardic Jews in the area before deciding to relocate. Each assumed there would be other Jews, and that was enough. Considering that in many cases they might have found employment in cities with more visible Sephardic populations, it seems that ethnic identity was not a crucial factor in their decision. For those using personal networks, however, Sephardic identity is crucial to economic viability, and provides initial social contacts. Still, one successful businessman from Egypt, who calls Washington his home,"definitely," reminded me that "the Jew is a nomad," who will always move on to improve his future.

Other characteristics of the Washington area include its high degree of transience--one that is ranked by the census bureau, however, as only 24th in the nation--and its extremely cosmopolitan nature. One's neighbors are likely to have lived or travelled abroad, or at the minimum have been born in another part of the country. In 1980, the schools of Montgomery County, Maryland, where many Sephardim live, educated 2400 students speaking 83 different languages. Schools in the area routinely include ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programs.

Another feature of Washington life is its class, rather than ethnic, residence pattern. Those neighborhoods in the area that are usually called "ethnic" are those in which the residents are also poor, and therefore do not have the economic freedom to choose their neighborhoods. White middle-class ethnics are scattered throughout the District, Maryland and Virginia, commuting to jobs and, if they elect to do so, to ethnically-based associations. One Sephardi remarked that she had lived in such a cosmopolitan neighborhood in Egypt, and therefore never thought to look for a "Jewish neighborhood" when she came to Washington. There are areas

of greater density of Jews, but not of Sephardim per se; however, these "Jewish" areas are not marked by overt signs of traditional Jewish neighborhoods such as a cluster of religious institutions, groceries and restaurants, nor is the density such that Jews are the majority in any extended region.

Sephardim are scattered throughout the Washington metropolitan area, choosing their homes by proximity to work or sponsors. By the time they learn of the Congregation's existence--if they ever do--they may live far away and have other obligations. It is also likely that they will have other synagogue affiliations.

No matter how one defines it, the Washington Sephardim are a select population. The majority have arrived in Washington after many moves, perhaps--as is the case of one woman--from Turkey, to Israel, to France, to Kansas City and finally to Washington. Many Jews from Morocco had gone first to Israel, but refused to accept the second-class social and economic status asigned them by their Moroccan birth. Others recoiled at the social climate in France, where they felt they would be perpetual outsiders. Many had lived elite lives in Morocco, Egypt, or the Balkans, and French is their common language. Sephardim from abroad are likely to speak several other languages as well.

In sum, first-generation Sephardim of Washington are international in origin, language and experience, with family members in Europe, the Middle East, North and South America. They are a collection of individuals who chose to engage their fate and change it. And, of course, they are those who had the freedom to choose such spatial and economic movement, whether because of personal contacts, education or finances. They were willing also to leave friends and family behind in order to dare the future.

A woman from Turkey summed up the problems and pleasures of being a Sephardi in Washington when she said: "It's rare to find a native Washingtonian... so (it's easier) to be included. As opposed to France, a lot of strangers settle here...you are like one of them...you don't see the difference." But being included in the world of strangers, with its abundance of ethnic restaurants, food markets, folk fairs and cultural events, where one's accent or migratory history is commonplace, also shields the individual from the need to assert an ethnic identity.

In Washington, where professional networks are so openly discussed and important to the aspiring professional, one may choose his social definition to suit the occasion. He may define himself through occupation, through political or interest group, or through region--as a Turk or Bulgarian, and not as a Jew or Sephardi at all. He may decide that his class interestes, the only ones he is likely to share with his neighbors, are more important functionally than his ethnic identity. In such a situation, where ascription by others is weakened or irrelevant to the social interchange, ethnic identity becomes a psychological state, not a necessary public statement. It becomes, therefore, elective. Community leaders are dependent on the individual's motivation to step forward and identify himself.

Furthermore, while it is possible for the highly motivated researcher or Sephardi to locate other Sephardim and attend social events, it is also possible for the cosmopolitan Sephardi to find compatible associates through the city's numerous cultural, political and occupational societies. Whether it is in the form of the Turkish-American Society, the Alliance Français, the American Jewish organizations or the American Civil Liberties Union, the competition for an individual's time is intense. Despite its fairs, Balls, and other religious and

cultural events, the Congregation lists many members who participate in the collective only through yearly dues.

"Is there a Sephardic community in Washington?"

Frequently in the course of the fieldwork, I was asked by Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike,"Is there a Sephardic community in Washington?" The answer is a conditional "Yes," if one is willing to accept community as an abstract concept indicating a pride in a glorious, if mostly unknown, history and culture, and a tradition of warmth and hospitality, represented in some homes by a holiday pastry or ritual. Each Sephardi I met jealously guards this vision of a special closeness among Sephardim that is not to be found among other Jews and Americans. Even a third-generation American-born student at an area college, with almost no knowledge of Sephardic history or culture, identified being a Sephardi with a "special warmth in the home," and a "cosmopolitan" outlook.

This ideal, abstract image of community appears to be metally compatible with a city of bureaucrats and displaced persons, and with much of American society today. Ultimately, however, such abstractions are emotionally unsatisfying. "Community," after all, suggests "home," a home among people. The very independence of outlook, education and means that prompts people to make individual moves to new parts of the world undermines their efforts to remake "home," with its connotations of sensuality, close personal ties, neighborhood interaction and unstated understandings--that is, the natural, unrationalized way of doing things. "Community" suggests an informality and spontaneous hospitality that cannot exist as such when social interaction is dependent on appointments, phone calls and car trips. In the modern city as represented by

Washington, each step to create community is a rational, purposeful act, one directly antithetical to the end that is desired. Most Sephardim abandon the effort. For them, Sephardic warmth must rest in their cherished and idealized past, and they must continue their accommodation to American life on the intimate as well as the public level.

The altered status in Washington of the Moroccan custom of Maimouna is illustrative of the changes fostered by the American experience. Washington's Moroccan Jews remember the relaxed, proximate nature of this post-Passover open house, where friends and neighbors walked from home to home, tasting sweet and special foods, and wishing each other a good new year. At the homes in Maryland where I attended Maimounas, the tables were set as beautifully as in Morocco, with symbolic foods, cakes, cookies, milk, dates and honey. On one table, the fresh fish even had a flower in its "ear." People came and went, but the distances are great between Maimouna tables, and celebrants must travel from Maryland to the District to Virginia. Instead of a casual, informal interchange, those who came had been invited, and one's neighbors do not share in the visits. Doors are closed, not open.

Maimouna continues, but because of the conscious decisions necessitated by its new context, the ritual represents a very much more selective concept of community.

NOTES

This paper is based on fieldwork done in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area from September, 1977 to October, 1981. A more comprehensive treatment of the subject may be found in Cosmopolitans at Home: An Anthropological View of the Sephardic Jews of Washington, D.C., unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, 1982.

1. There is actually one Sephardi known to have come to Washington before this time. However, because he was alone, he joined Ashkenazic groups and had no part in originating a Sephardic presence in the area.

2. The American Jewish Yearbook, 1980:165.

3. Kenneth Sparks of the Federal City Council, quoted in McGrath, Peter and Howard Means. 1980. "Washington Coming of Age: How Washington Became a Real City," The Washingtonian 16:1, 160.